How to cite this article:

PRE-SCHOOL CURRICULUM: IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

[1]Osma Shafie, [2]Fauziah Ab Rahim, [3]Sarimah Shaik Abdullah
[1] *Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah Kubang Pasu*
[2,3] *School of Education, Universiti Utara Malaysia*

Corresponding author: *osmashafie06@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Early Education is vital for the continuous learning of children. Preschool teachers play their role and are also responsible for implementing teaching and learning, using the National Preschool Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP KSPK). However, there are constraints in the implementation of the DSKP KSPK. This article aims to present the challenges faced by pre-school teachers in teaching and learning in pre-schools. The challenges faced include external and internal factors. External aspects involve the nation's policy and leadership, trust and societal culture and school administrators. Internal challenges include teachers' readiness regarding knowledge in the area, level of understanding, skills and attitude. In conclusion, previous studies also present challenges that require continuous training to be given to teachers and administrators to strengthen early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

Pre-schools under the Ministry of Education have been in operation since 1992. The curriculum used was formulated by the Curriculum Development Centre, and it has been reviewed many times since its inception in 1986 until 2017, by focusing on a student-centred learning approach, in line with the global aspirations that demand a balanced and holistic development of children and to produce a high-level generation of thinkers (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017). The National Preschool Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP KSPK), which is implemented in pre-schools in Malaysia, provides early educational opportunities for children between the ages of four and five years. Early childhood education is categorized as informal education (Act 550, *Akta Pendidikan*, 1996), whereby children of these age groups do not need to attend pre-school education. However, the curriculum is implemented based on the international guidelines (NAEYC 2005). Education at this level must be adapted to suit the country's background and the current learning needs. For that reason, since it was first introduced, early childhood education has undergone several transformations and challenges (Nutbrown & Clough, 2013). These challenges do not only concern Malaysia but also involves most developing countries which adopted the western curriculum. Therefore, this paper attempts to discuss some of the issues and challenges in implementing a pre-school curriculum globally based on the literature in this field. It also highlights the scenario in the Malaysian context and suggests implications for practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political, Economic and Social Challenges

Earlier studies have indicated challenges in implementing early childhood education curriculum, including political, economic, social, and cultural challenges (Boaten, 2010; Syomwene, 2013;

Zhu, 2010; Zhou, 2011; Guo, 2013). Challenges are bound to follow every change, and so does the curriculum change. In other words, there will be challenges during its implementation (Syomwene, 2013) and many developing countries face the challenges differently. This section illustrates political, economic and social challenges faced by developing countries.

Political

Studies conducted by Boaten (2010) in Ghana and Syomwene (2013) in Kenya, for example, show that political, economic and social factors make it difficult to change the pre-school curriculum. Political change which took place in Ghana and Kenya caused the structure of society to change. When the new leaders took over the country, they changed the policies related to pre-school education. Often, these changes are made based on the needs of the current political parties. Syomwene (2013) argues that the government implemented the curriculum policy without any prior discussion with the education administrators since it was implemented quickly, on an "ad hoc" basis .

Traditionally, the society adhered firmly to the doctrine of compliance to community leaders and this change is based on the top-down policies provided by the current rulers. For instance, their traditional beliefs of animism changed to religiousness when school institutions started to offer Christian teachings to the children. With this new teaching approach, social relationships in the society created a more extensive communication, whereby children become unrestricted to mix with all ages. This new development has created dissatisfaction among the community as the new values somehow contradicted their values and practices. The nation's leaders also provided free education to primary and secondary school pupils, which has led to the emergence of an overwhelming number of students in each classroom; for example, there were more than 40 students in one classroom.

Economic

From the economic perspective, challenges faced during the implementation of pre-school Education are related to lack of facilities and funding, poor infrastructure, inadequate equipment and insufficient resources provided, particularly in low-socio-economic

populations, leading to non-implementation of effective teaching and learning (Zhu, 2010; Zhou, 2011; Guo, 2013; Syomwene, 2013). These studies have shown that different countries experience challenges differently.

Studies conducted by Zhu (2010), Zhou (2011) and Guo (2013) in China indicated that even though teachers are given a creative curriculum, they are unable to implement it due to parental pressure. Parents from low-income communities insisted that their children master reading and writing skills to ensure survival for their future careers. In other words, they demanded a more academically based curriculum to provide a better job for their children in the future. In a similar vein, Keang-ieng (2016), in their study of the Miou ethnic minority group in the rural areas of China, found that poverty has led them to make their children work to help meet the rising cost of living. The parents are happy with the children learning social skills to interact with family and neighbours instead of going to school. Furthermore, the schools are far away, compounding their difficulty to get an education at schools. Remoteness and poverty (Keang-ieng, 2016) and lack of resources (Simon, 2016) have made it challenging to implement teaching and learning at the pre-school level in these communities.

In contrast, Boaten (2010) explained that having many sons is a fortune and something to be proud of for the Ghanaian community as it is a source of income for the family. However, after colonization, the sons of Ghanaian families had to become labourers on the farm to earn revenue for the colonial masters. It has brought a negative impact on the children, resulting in them not attending school.

Erden (2010) conducted a study that involved 223 private and public kindergartens in Ankara, Turkey and found that the challenges faced by pre-schools were divided into physical facilities, assessment, activity planning, teaching and learning processes, social environment, goals and objectives and curriculum content. Erden (2010) claimed that there are differences in the level of challenges for different agencies. For example, public schools lack physical facilities as compared to private schools. Mehmet (2017), on the other hand, argues in terms of the management of schools, particularly in middle and high-income populations in Turkey. He stated that the pre-school programme in

the high-income population is better because of the high allocation of resources provided to the schools compared to the low-income areas. Moreover, parents in high-income areas are more aware of the importance of Education and can efficiently channel resources to support the implementation of such programmes. Besides, teachers working in private pre-schools are better paid than the government pre-schools. On top of that, they have their school building with adequate teachers, staff and fewer students, focusing on 3-6-year old children only. In addition, all teachers can communicate with administrators more often compared to primary schools with many teachers, staff and students of various ages. It is supported by Abdul Halim and Siti Amira (2016), who postulated that parents of high economic status could manage the time to send and fetch their children to and from the school as they have both transport and maids to manage their homes. Regarding early childhood education in Istanbul, the study of Aygün, Yildizbaş, & Aygün, (2014) found that the problem faced by teachers is class management. Small classes with a large number of pupils lead to the problem of unwarranted behaviour among students. They claimed that an area of at least two metres for a child is very suitable, enabling them to move around comfortably.

Social or cultural factor

Another challenge, as indicated in the literature, is related to social or cultural factors. Zhu (2010), Zhou (2011) and Guo (2013) argue that challenges in China are different from those in Ghana and Kenya or other countries. They claimed that as the education policy does not mandate all 4-5-year-olds to attend pre-schools, many school administrators are not serious about implementing the pre-school curriculum. In addition, Zhu (2010), Zhou (2011) and Guo (2013) stated that the curriculum changes are influenced by a strong traditional culture that exists in China that is Communism versus the Western culture. This phenomenon has made it difficult for teachers to implement a new curriculum adopted from western culture. For instance, in many communities in China, in the Miau communities, traditional understanding of education still prevails among the Miau minorities in China. The findings in Keang-ieng (2016) study indicated that children's education means learning about social skills and interacting with family and neighbours without the need to go to school.

Similarly, Lee and Tseng's study (2008) in Taiwan has shown a traditional cultural conflict between Confucianism and Western culture. Confucianism ideology still dominates the curriculum development beginning from the pre-school. Confucianism treats children as obedient beings, disciplined, silent, asking for permission to do something and not speaking behind one's back. Conflicts arise when teachers want to implement a student-centred approach adopted from the Western culture as it provides freedom for self-expression. The student-centred approach is based on the children's interests, thus making them more creative and self-reliant, different from Confucianism and its values.

The emphasis on strict academic matters is still strong due to the Chinese education system, which is traditionally exam-oriented. The study in Singapore by Ng (2010) reviews the perception of parents and administrators on curriculum change. Ng (2010) conducted interviews with five administrators with diploma qualifications in pre-school management, three pre-school teachers and four parents. The observation was carried out in a class of four to five-year-old children and four to six-year-old children. Ng (2010) found out that the challenges faced in the implementation are due to cultural conflicts, namely traditional culture vs Western culture. This finding is in tandem with the results in Kenya (Syomwene, 2013) and China. Parents' attitude in not wanting to cooperate with teachers is a significant challenge for implementing early childhood curriculum (Simon, 2016; Mahomed, 2004). This situation is also found in Hong Kong in Lau's study (2010), which indicates a greater emphasis on academic development than the physical, social and emotional developmental aspects of children.

Teacher Factor

The teacher factor is another challenge in early childhood education. Many studies indicate that pre-school teachers are not well equipped with knowledge and concepts of early childhood curriculum (Simon,2016), and some of them lacked training (Mehmet et al., (2017). Ntumi (2016) found that the challenges faced by pre-school teachers in Ghana Metropolis are that teachers do not understand the curriculum, while the difficulties faced by pre-school teachers in Cambodia are due to the teachers themselves and environmental factors.

Abdul Halim & Siti Amira (2016) discovered that new teachers encounter difficulty communicating with parents, particularly when handling sick children who should be on sick leave and not allowed to attend school. Teachers need to be equipped with skills in dealing with parents who over-emphasized academic achievement and ill-mannered parents who blamed teachers and other students when their child was hurt without investigating the root cause of the problem. All these pose prime challenges to early childhood providers. Some parents do not even have the opportunity to communicate with teachers concerning their children's development because they leave their children under the supervision of a maid or other family members. Some parents consider teachers as guardians of their children and pass children's proper upbringing to teachers.

Jiang (2005), on the other hand, found that workload, limited time and lack of autonomy, especially for teachers with families, have caused many teachers to become tired and less committed to implementing the new pre-school curriculum. Having too many students in the classroom has become more complicated because the ratio between teachers, students and space does not correspond effectively. As a result, the task load of teachers has increased without a commensurate salary. The assessment process to track student achievement is also unclear, and the majority of the community is still illiterate, hence providing no help or support for pre-school Education (Syomwene, 2013). In terms of teachers' readiness, Syomwene (2013) also discovered that some pre-school administrators do not have the skills to manage. Similarly, Mehmet (2017) found that some administrators and teachers in primary schools did not have early childhood education-related training compared to trained administrators and teachers at private pre-schools.

In Nigeria, the objective of early Education is to produce balanced students in all aspects of development. However, various challenges exist, including quality of pre-schools, teachers' qualifications and ability to master the curriculum for teaching and learning implementation, student-teacher ratio, classroom financing cost and the need for supervisors to guide teachers to ensure the teaching and learning objectives are attainable (Akinrotimi, & Olowe, 2016).

Implementation of the Curriculum Approach

Recent studies have also found that the challenges faced by teachers in KSPK are related to the implementation of teaching and learning

of the subject matter (Lucy Gawis, 2007) such as pre-school music (Ali & Mahamod, 2015) language skills (Rahman, Nordin& Alias, 2013), lack of ICT skills (Chee, Md Nor, Othman, & Abdul,2018), curriculum and ICT content knowledge (Abu, Mohamed,., & Rahman,, 2018), Science (Abdul Aziz & Mamat,2018), English (Masnan &Mohd Radzi(2014), and existing knowledge of the new teachers (Wan Rahman, & Yunus,2018), as well as their cognitive thinking and essential Mathematics (Jamil,2018).

One of the approaches of pre-school Education is the concept of learning through play. Many teachers have their conceptions of learning through play. Ng's studies (2010, 2014) focused on implementing the student-centred approach with the learning through play method as the practical practice. She discovered that the teachers interpreted the games to be played according to their own experiences. Teachers were found to use worksheets in the lessons, and games are only played if they can complete their worksheet assignments. Teachers do not believe that games are an essential medium for the development of children.

To explore this issue further, Ng (2010,2014) spent time in the classroom to observe the actual situation. Her survey indicated that parents wanted teachers to teach formally with emphasis on academics achievement and not learning through games. In the opinion of parents, pre-school institutions are places to learn, not to play. Ng also found that teachers translated pedagogical theory and games differently due to a lack of training and knowledge on the concept of learning through play. Therefore, cooperation is needed involving school administrators, teachers and parents, so that the learning through play approach can become an effective pedagogical practice that parents clearly understand.

Meanwhile, Sablonniere, Taylor and Sadykova (2009) found that challenges in the implementation of the pre-school curriculum also applies to new teachers, who are less confident in implementing learning through play approach (Duman, 2013), as well as the difficulty in changing the mindset of teachers for the implementation of the student-centred approach.

In a different study, Beneke (2000) used three teachers to share their experiences after a year of following the project approach. Through

this partnership, Beneke (2000) found that the project approach is beneficial to students as it is easy to follow. For example, if a student is absent, another student can perform the assignment for that student. Teachers also do not teach conventionally but prepare specific tasks. In this way, student assessment can be implemented effectively. However, there are also some challenges, i.e., more time is required to manage student portfolio as it involves skills, time, finding suitable materials and planning and supervising study visits carefully.

Rushton, Rushton and Larkin (2010) discussed early childhood education in the UNESCO Conference on 27-29 September 2010 in Moscow, which emphasized the pattern of pre-school development in different countries. Rushton et al. (2010) tested two other models that he considered to impact early childhood education significantly. The first model focused on the behaviour of children toward learning approaches through games, while the second model focused on direct teaching aspects as contained in The High Scope. The use of both models is a melting point between pre-school and primary school. Rushton et al.'s (2010) study shows that teaching continues to be an impetus for children to master reading, writing, counting and thinking skills so much so that it reduces their motivation for learning. Testing on the first model shows that children are very excited to explore their environment. The question is on how to integrate these two models into the current pre-school curriculum. As such, more emphasis should be given to systems rather than children and making changes to curriculum and teacher training.

The Scenario of Challenges in Malaysia

Pre-school children in Malaysia consist of different races, cultures and languages spoken at home. All these ethnic groups, including minority groups, have the right to get early Education (Anna Christina, 2009). A study by Juli, Awang Fadzil,& Zainol (2013) found that the orang Asli in Perak are distanced from early education opportunities and therefore, their children's rights are denied. However, efforts have been made by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the *Orang Asli* Department. Various challenges are being encountered due to the lack of confidence of residents in teachers and tribal sentiments that the administrators are not aware of.

To ensure that all 4-5-year-olds get an early education opportunity, the biggest challenge is to empower teachers by providing facilities,

allowances and benefits to motivate teachers in their profession (Hussin, 2014). Kassim (2016) touched on issues and challenges in nurturing pre-school students' character, given that parents are more concerned with their children's academic achievement. The emphasis on character development is based on the core of Islamic Education in KSPK. Other constraints include the suitability of teaching aids and the safety of the premises. The main challenge for teachers is to ensure that life-long learning can take place. Teachers should be willing to make changes in teaching and learning to address the challenges they will face (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

In addition, Abdul & Wan (2018) claimed that the constraints faced by pre-school teachers in the 2017 curriculum revision were a lack of teaching aids and the non-replacement of existing teaching resources, which had been damaged. Teachers and teacher assistants need to take a long time to prepare teaching aids**,** thus increasing the burden of teachers and teacher assistants**.** Teachers are also unclear about student assessment, while administrators and parents misinterpreted the pre-school curriculum revision of 2017. The teachers are under stress to ensure that pre-school children master reading and writing skills and pass Literacy and Numeracy (LINUS) tests when they move to primary school.

Practitioner's Reflection on Pre-School Curriculum in Malaysia

Earlier studies have indicated that teachers cannot effectively implement teaching and learning due to their lack of technical subjects and skills (Syomwene 2013; Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Akinrotimi, & Olowe, 2016; Erden, 2010). Likewise, Ng (2010) posited that teachers' lack of exposure to the concept of learning through play makes them vague about the idea. Similarly, Nabie, Kolowole Raheem, Agbemaka & Sabtiwu, (2016) found in their study on the teaching of Mathematics that exposure to the curriculum is unclear and is delivered in different ways. Inadequate allocation and guidance to encourage teachers to implement this concept have caused teachers to implement it in a way that conflicts with the curriculum guidelines (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Researchers claim that teachers are the implementers who share their everyday experiences with children in the classroom, and they should be experienced and qualified to manage them (Frede, 1995; Dodge, Dulik & Kulhanek, 2001; Frede, & Ackerman, 2006; Guven, 2008).

Although the curriculum has complete content and adapted to the philosophical basis, it does not mean teachers will understand it well. Therefore, teachers' professional development programmes need to be planned and undertaken continuously. Continuous monitoring from the policymakers needs to be conducted too to monitor the implementation of the new curriculum. At the same time, children's achievement can also be further enhanced by equipping pre-school teachers with the knowledge and skills in their respective areas (Bustam 2013). Given all these studies, more training programmes are required to train pre-school teachers in Malaysia.

Erden (2010) proposed carrying out a detailed and specific study on curriculum implementation practices concerning how they should be implemented. The training session contents should be constantly updated to meet the increasing needs and demands of teachers. Counsellors must comprise early childhood education specialists rather than experts in conducting seminars or workshops. Training must be integrated into practice. When teachers lack knowledge about the implementation and lack skilled people, they need training (Akinrotimi, & Olowe, 2016). Zhu (2010) mentioned that training should be given according to each teacher's level of knowledge and skills. The content of training should include thinking skills and not just providing information. Trainers need to constantly assist teachers practically at the exact location when performing their daily tasks at school. Trainers must help teachers write case studies, reflect and make observations on teacher-child behaviour. Strengthening pedagogy must be made the main focus in training. In this way, trainees can learn how to implement the teaching and learning method in real-life situations by forming small groups at school (Haroon 2004).

According to Linda Darling-Hammond (2010), teachers need to be trained to improve their level of knowledge, skills, and professionalism. It is necessary to ensure transformation occurs among the teachers themselves. It is supported by Sofoa and Tsafos (2009), who claimed that teachers should want to be trained. Self-commitment will be more successful compared to coercion. Similarly, Sulaiman, Sulaiman, and Abdul Rahim (2017) mentioned that the key to the successful implementation of the curriculum is teachers' readiness and acceptance.

Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove (2002), in their study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning, found that teachers who do not understand the curriculum will not be able to implement pedagogy effectively, while quality teachers will continue to learn. Moyles et al. (2002) proposed that teachers need to be given much training better to understand the meaning of the curriculum and pedagogy. Further, the level of activity also determines the extent of knowledge of teachers in early childhood education. In another study, Tang & Adamson (2014) found that urban teachers lack understanding of the teacher-centred approach in the implementation of English in secondary schools, and this is a challenge as they are a source of reference for teachers in rural areas. Even though teachers are prepared, they still need the training to allow them to perform more effectively.

Meanwhile, Savage and Drake (2016) and Nordin (2017) proposed a curriculum of teaching and learning in the 21st century to be implemented by allowing students to participate in activities. However, their findings show that teachers are worried about the implementation of the curriculum. This is because they lacked control over the curriculum.

As policymakers in this field, after reviewing the challenges presented earlier, it is felt that more training is needed for the pre-school teachers, particularly in Malaysia, to ensure the quality of pre-school education and improve the teachers' readiness in implementing the new pre-school curriculum. The training given to the teachers should contain both high-level thinking elements and in-depth knowledge of the relevant issues in the field. It is in line with the country's aspiration to produce students with a high level of thinking to suit the 21st century needs and demands. Thus, teachers must first master creative and critical teaching skills in all subjects and have an in-depth knowledge of related issues. Education should be a life-long learning process and not end when students graduate from college or university (Abdull Kareem & Khuan, 2005).

Even though The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (PPPM, 2012) provides careful long-term planning to change the education landscape in Malaysia to adapt to the global situation of international standards, the school administrators play an essential role in ensuring successful implementation. The plan is prepared through three waves,

namely in the first wave raising standards and support systems from 2013 to 2015. The second wave is strengthening career advancement and path from 2016 to 2020 and the third wave by creating a culture of peer-based professionalism excellence from 2021 to 2025. The plan also gradually changed teachers' readiness to the point of being a trigger for ideas in early Education. Preschool teachers are now exposed to information through a variety of sources in the information technology era. However, school administrators still see classrooms and early childhood education teachers as something isolated instead of the focus given to classrooms and teachers who teach in the mainstream. Although training and information have been provided to the school administrators by various relevant parties such as the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the Aminudin Baki Institute with the guidance given from time to time by the District Education Office, the attitude of such administrators become like a hereditary culture as if it has no end. School administrators must be aware that the pre-school teacher needs to get continuous guidance individually and in a small group as a catalyst to continue improving their skills and knowledge to spark new ideas in teaching and learning. Each teacher has different advantages when combined to trigger creative teaching and learning ideas. At this stage, the challenge is seen from a positive angle, as an opportunity for something new. The ideas that are still hidden in a teacher should be highlighted with the principle that each teacher has its strengths, and administrative issues must be addressed over time to balance administrators' management with the readiness of pre-school teachers.

CONCLUSION

Implementation of early childhood education is undergoing various challenges involving political, economic and cultural factors. These challenges are universal and different countries may experience them differently. Past studies have shown that teachers play an essential role in the implementation process. Therefore, teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge of the curriculum and the skills in managing the children and their learning. Continuous training for the teachers is necessary to ensure the quality of pre-school education and improve the teachers' readiness in the implementation process. Administrators of pre-schools and policymakers need to make

training and teacher professional development an essential agenda in their planning. Overall, changes at the primary level will bring about the required changes in early childhood education and will eliminate the challenges faced by pre-school teachers and practitioners.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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